



## Communication and Interaction Team

# Social Interactions and Friendships

Characteristics of people with autism vary from person to person and it is a myth that children and young people with autism, do not want friends. Many do, but do not understand how to initiate social interactions.

*"It's as if everybody is playing some complicated game and I am the only one who hasn't been told the rules."*

*Martian in the playground, C Sainsbury, p8*

Many children with autism find social interactions and friendships a real challenge and do not intuitively know how to communicate and interact with their peers. This means that many children and young people on the autism spectrum need help in learning how to act in different types of social situations.

It is important to understand that difficulties with social interactions and friendships can cause huge anxiety for children and young people with autism and this can have a detrimental effect on their mental health in the short and long term. In addition to this, Children, Young People and later adults with autism are potentially vulnerable in social relationships due to difficulties with understanding language and the rules of social interaction.

Often social interactions and friendships become more nuanced and complicated, as children get older and move from Primary to Secondary school, this is particularly true for girls during unpredictable, unstructured, largely unsupervised times at school. Compared with boys, adolescent girls can face more complex social expectations. *(See One Minute Guide: Girls and Autism)*



## Strategies to Support

- Take the time to get alongside a child or young person with autism and find out what works and does not work for them in terms of supporting social interactions and friendships. Draw up a plan of what they feel would help. This might involve telling their peers about autism.
- Children with autism need to be explicitly taught specific and/or new social skills and given opportunities to practice them in a variety of situations to generalise learning. They should be told what to do, not what not to do, for example: not 'No James' instead: 'James wait, Sarah is first.'



- Children and young people will need to be taught social skills and given the opportunity to practice and role model/role play social interactions. Use repetition and elaboration, alongside the teaching of key phrases such as: can I join in? The use of a talking stick and board games will be useful to teach turn taking.
- As a role model, being slightly over-dramatic will help the child with autism understand the points you are illustrating; for example: body



language, tone of voice and coping with mistakes.

- It is very important to remember that unstructured times, such as break and lunchtimes can be very difficult for children and young people with autism – communication in the playground is less predictable and they might not know how to join in or not have friends.



- With the child or young person, you may like to consider providing different options for break and lunchtime activities. This could be access to places they can go to recharge their batteries and be quiet – the library for example, or access to adult supervised structured lunchtime clubs, where social interactions will be more predictable.
- It is important to specifically teach the child to develop their understanding of their own emotions, and link to physical feelings. Use visual cues (such as the 5 point scale) to support understanding. *(See One Minute Guide: Top Ten Tips to Support CYP with autism)*
- Provide regular, timetabled opportunities for the child to check in with a trusted adult at the end of lunchtimes or unstructured times to support the development of the child's social understanding. These sessions need to

celebrate the things which have gone well, as well as unpicking any difficulties which have occurred. Use the 5 Point Scale to support the child's understanding.

If there has been a conflict, it is important to stick to the facts. Emotional pleading will not work. A useful approach would be to use comic strip conversations and personalised social stories to unpick situations where social interactions have gone wrong and also to prepare students for situations where social interactions are needed. Keep these in a folder/book so that they can look at them again and rehearse what they need to do in certain situations.

- It may be useful, for a child or young person to have an identified buddy to support them at various points throughout the day.
- When working as part of a group, children and young people with autism will need to be taught the rules of group work, and be given clear roles and responsibilities. The use of visual cues will support understanding, as in the Lego Therapy approach.
- All staff to avoid the use of sarcasm and idioms. Staff should also be aware of their non-verbal communication which many children and young people with autism may not be able to interpret.
- All staff should recognise that a child or young person with autism may use inappropriate tone of voice and body language.

### Useful resources, links and further reading: Websites:

Talkabout for Children – Developing Friendship Skills: Alex Kelly

Talkabout for Children – Developing Social Skills: Alex Kelly

Social Survival: A manual for those with Autism and other logical thinkers: Amy Eleftheriades

National Autistic Society:  
<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/communication/social-children.aspx>